**The possession of knowledge carries an ethical responsibility**

The quote assumes that the possession of knowledge carries an ethical responsibility i.e. that simply knowing something makes you ethically responsible. This can also bring up the question, “what is knowledge and what is considered to be fact or fiction?” There is a complex background of the word “knowledge” because it is such a broad description. Knowledge can be everything and anything as long as the object being studied supports the act of learning. Ethical responsibility refers to the idea that you should do something to correct a harmful situation or prevent harm from happening; it is based on a person’s moral values and sense of what is right or wrong. The object of harm may be you, other people, animals or aspects of the environment. This quote has limitations; one can agree or disagree to it. I for one agree that knowledge does carry an ethical responsibility as individuals, in my opinion, must consider consequences of their actions and the amount of people that these consequences will affect. I believe that everyone and everything obtains some degree or form of knowledge and may or may not act upon it. In this TOK Essay I will use Language and Sense perception as Ways of Knowing as well as History, and Science as Areas of Knowledge to answer the question, “is it the possession of knowledge that has an effect on humanity in and of itself, or is it the decisions made using knowledge where one can potentially have a significant impact?”

The possession of knowledge in the concluding circumstances should carry with it certain indisputable ethical obligations to society on a large scale and avoid misleading the community. Experts in society, for example, are highly specialized in their field and their work is trusted by their clients in a form of authority worship. Although clients should be slightly sceptical to any knowledge gained from experts, experts must do their best to avoid creating misunderstandings. Science provides the knowledge that can be beneficial for society or can cause great harm onto others. These results arise from the decisions and actions made by those with the possession of this knowledge. For example, using science as an area of knowledge, a psychologist intentionally biases an individual’s way of thinking. It is unethical for someone to suggest any form of knowledge without having evidence, unless the lack of evidence is clearly stated. This indicates how one holds an ethical responsibility in possessing the knowledge and is obligated to make decisions using the knowledge gained; therefore impacting the lives of others. Such situations can be related to reality; research opportunities from the Large Hadron Collider have experienced a dilemma such as nuclear studies. Nuclear research can benefit many people but this research and gain in knowledge can be used to cause an increase in nuclear weapons. Does the scientist who acquired this knowledge have the ethical responsibility to indirectly cause a bigger, nuclear problem? Here morality comes not from just knowing how to make a nuclear weapon, but the decision of the knowledge bearer on how and whether they will utilize their knowledge.

History is another area of knowledge from which knowledge is gained and therefore allows us as individuals to test our moral sense and to refine it against some of the real complexities individuals have faced in difficult situations. We as individuals are able to make better and more ethical decisions in future after witnessing historic events. As George Santayana (1863-1952) stated; “those who don’t study the past are condemned to repeat it.” In this case if knowledge is not shared with others, there is no way of preventing harm from happening to oblivious individuals after a repeated gain in similar knowledge. For instance, society would be slowly deteriorating at a higher rate if it weren’t for James Watson and Francis Crick’s discovery in 1953; we cannot be sure that other individuals would have been able to make the same discoveries. The two scientists used their ethics to decide on their responsibility of what to do with the knowledge of the discovery of DNA and its relation to the human body. They had the ethical responsibility to share this knowledge with the public which had and has benefited many lives throughout the world considering the fact that it has helped doctors understand diseases in greater detail.

The subjects, in which knowledge may be based, being the areas of knowledge in TOK, are not the only sources from which knowledge is gained. The ways of knowing; sense perception, reason, emotion, and language, additionally result in a gain of knowledge. This suggests that witnessing an accidental murder committed by a friend would create knowledge about that event and therefore the way of knowing in this case is sense perception. The witness holds an ethical obligation in possession of this knowledge to report this crime as well as to protect a friend. The witness is responsible for this crime legally and ethically if they choose to remain silent. If the witness chooses to report this crime, an attempt must be made to be as accurate as possible without any exaggeration. Furthermore, taking language as another way of knowing, there is a need to consider what is morally correct to say as the witness must describe their experience through language. It is difficult to fully describe this experience and in terms of the language, the selection of word choice is challenging. Ethically the event must be described using words that the witness feels will describe the event in full detail as it would be unethical to describe this scenario while failing to mention any clues that would give away who the accidental killer. This example demonstrates that non-academic knowledge carries obligations as well as morals involved when anyone attempts to distribute their knowledge.

A personal experience in relation to the topic can be given in order to further prove why I believe knowledge does carry an ethical responsibility. I witnessed two of my classmates cheating. I was faced with a dilemma; was it my duty to tell the teachers about this occurrence considering the fact that it was wrong or was it my duty to keep quiet about it because they are my classmates; my friends? In order to have abided by the rules of the school, it would have been my duty to tell the teachers. However in order to have held an ethical responsibility to my friends and to prevent any harm to the students’, whom are my friends, it would have been my duty to keep quiet about it. I could have made the decision to either act upon the knowledge gained or do nothing at all; acting upon the knowledge gained would have had a significant impact on the situation. Generally the knowledge gained in certain situations is processed through our minds, incorporating bias and moral. A decision is made on whether or not the knowledge must be shared or withheld within our minds.

I believe you can look at this title from different points of view. In my opinion the possession of knowledge does carry an ethical responsibility because there are certain kinds of knowledge that impose an obligation or a challenge on the person who carries that knowledge. Most people probably wish to act responsible with their knowledge and act on it whereas many are stopped by all kinds of fears and prejudices. It also all depends on the type of knowledge that is gained and in certain situations.

The study of TOK consists of two major ethical philosophies; Kant and Utilitarianism. Generally, ethics states that actions taking place must be carried out to cause the most benefit but avoid causing harm to others. Kant’s theory states that individuals must act, with their knowledge gained, out of duty, rather than out of practical need or desire. This theory was based on the fact that Kant believed that reason should be used for performing ethical actions as the moral worth of an action is determined by the reason behind it, not the consequences. The determination of the worth of the reason of action is based on whether the reason is universally applicable; if so then the action performed is ethical. For example, according to Kant, lying is always wrong because the universal maxim that states that lying is not okay. The opposing view, by contrast, argues that ethical value lies in their consequences, not in our actions. John Stuart Mill proposed the utilitarianism theory which states that we should always aim at ensuring the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. Therefore telling a lie in particular situations is good if telling that lie produces good consequences; “The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the one” (Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan 1982). Kant’s theory is conclusively too inflexible whereas Utilitarianism is not restricted to only moral obligations. As previously mentioned, simply possessing knowledge does not have an effect on humanity in and of itself but the decisions made using knowledge can potentially have a significant impact.

In most of the situations occurring in the world, it appears that sharing the knowledge possessed would be the right course of action; provided that no harm is imposed on others in doing so. In terms of humanity, the reservation of knowledge from others is not only counterproductive, but morally unjust from a modern ethical perspective. Generally people gain misleading knowledge but are sometimes in situations where they must utilize their knowledge ethically. With their knowledge comes power and responsibility.